

SOFTWARE

FAQ

Q I've heard that you can get add-ons that add new features to Firefox. How do I use them, and where do I get them from?

A Firefox was designed to make it easy for people to write add-on extensions that change the way the browser works or simply add new features. Mozilla's website (www.mozilla.com) has a dedicated site for add-ons; just click the Add-ons button on the homepage. You can either browse through the available list of Extensions, or search for a specific one.

Each add-on has instructions on how to use it, but you only need to click the Install Now button on the webpage to update your browser. There are plenty to choose from, but one of our favourites is Showcase by Joseph del Rio. Once installed, pressing F12 pops up a window with thumbnails of all your Firefox tabs, making it quick to find the one you want.

David Ludlow

Deputy Editor



david@computershopper.co.uk

SYMANTEC Norton Ghost 12

★★★★★

£40 inc VAT

If you have ever faced the troubling task of recovering lost or corrupt files, or a whole Windows installation, you will know that unless you have taken steps before the fact, your chances of successful recovery are slim. Norton Ghost 12 provides a range of tools that take pre-emptive action and preserve files, folders or your entire hard disk, including the operating system and applications, and allows you to restore them in the event of trouble.

The most prominent feature of Ghost 12 is its ability to create an image of your hard disk – a compressed copy of your hard disk called a recovery point – that can be used to restore your computer if things go wrong. Recovery point creation can be scheduled, or set to run when new software is installed, files are opened, applications launched or users log on or off the computer. Ghost 12 allows you to create a new recovery point each time, or just add changes to the original, saving backup time and storage.

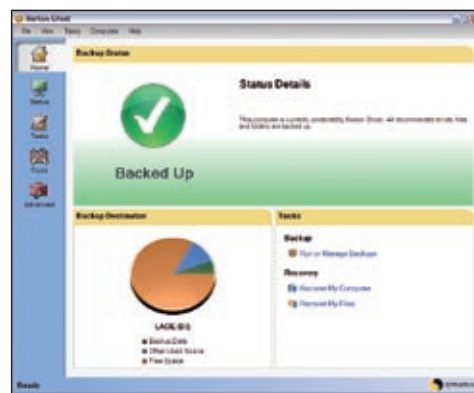
Saving a restore point is great if you want to return the system to a previous state, but it's not ideal if you want to recover only a single file. To restore the latest version of a file from an image requires both regular saving restore points and tedious browsing to find the file or folder you want to put back. Thankfully, there is a separate file and folder backup tool that allows you to quickly and efficiently identify files and folders for backup. You can specify one routine to back up just photo files, while another creates a backup of your music files and yet another backs up your emails. As before, you can set when and under what conditions you would like these backup routines to take place.

Disk images and file and folder backups can be stored locally, on a separate hard disk or partition, on CD or DVD, on an external storage device or a network location. Restoring one of these points, or files contained within them, from a fully functioning Windows system is as easy as selecting the desired point, but it's on more serious occasions when Windows fails to boot that Ghost earns its dough.

SUMMARY

- ✓ Very easy to use
- ✓ Flexible backup schedules
- ✗ Expensive

IMAGING SOFTWARE Requires Windows XP/Vista, 300MHz processor, 512MB memory, 160MB disk space
SUPPLIER www.symantec.co.uk
DETAILS www.symantec.co.uk



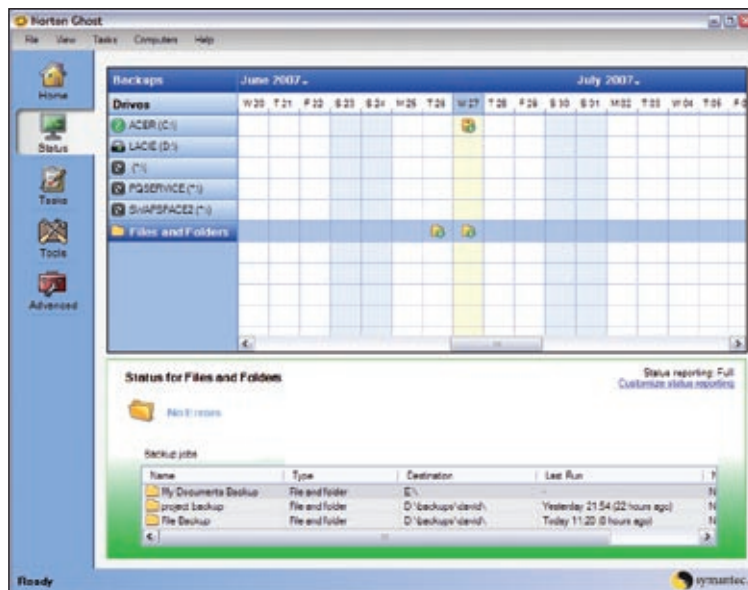
▲ With Norton Ghost 12, you set when and under what conditions you want your backup routines to take place

Ghost can be configured to prompt at boot time whether to load the current Windows configuration or restore to a previously saved point using its LightsOut application. This makes it easier to recover from a Windows catastrophe, but also easier for inexperienced users to accidentally overwrite important data by returning your computer to a previous state. For home computers with many users, it would be more secure to use the bootable recovery CD in an emergency. Either way, both options simply load a pared-down Windows interface with a Ghost recovery application, from which you choose your preferred recovery point.

In addition to the core disk image and backup tools, there are some handy extras. One of the most useful enables you to copy the entire contents of a hard disk to another drive. This is great if you are upgrading to a larger hard disk or your current drive is in the middle of a mechanical breakdown. Finally, there is a facility to create a virtual disk from a restore point, which means you can use the restore point as though it was a fully functioning hard disk in its own right.

Norton Ghost 12 is a useful tool both for general backup and system restore tasks. It can get you out of trouble and provides a more comprehensive suite of tools that its sister application, Save and Restore. However, Acronis's True Image 10 (see 'Also consider...', opposite) does the same job for almost half the price, and remains our recommended backup software.

David McKinnon



◀ A separate file and folder backup tool lets you quickly identify files and folders for backup

STEINBERG Sequel

★★★★★

£74 inc VAT

It's not often that we see a brand-new music-production application from a major software developer, and they don't come much bigger than Steinberg. The company is most famous for its Cubase range, with versions costing between £90 and £500, but Sequel is its first application designed from scratch for home users. Some elements of Sequel resemble Cubase, but it has more in common with Sony Acid Music and Apple GarageBand.

The interface fits into a single screen with tabs at the bottom for the mixer, effects, audio and MIDI editors and various other features. The Arrange Zone fills the central area and includes a streamlined set of tools for looping, arranging and truncating audio and MIDI clips. There are no options for fading objects in and out, but the channel's volume – or any other mix parameter – can be automated either by recording changes in real time or by drawing envelopes. New users will need the manual to get to grips with it, but Sequel's straightforward yet powerful automation is one of its best features.

Another strength is the bundled synthesizer sounds. Based on the excellent HALion One included with Cubase 4, it

covers a vast range of acoustic simulations and synthetic sounds and, best of all, can be browsed by instrument type, musical style or sonic character. Sounds can be previewed with a MIDI keyboard before importing into a song and, once imported, tweaked with a small selection of synthesis options. The instrument browser also includes a large collection of samples and MIDI phrases, allowing those without a MIDI keyboard to build up tracks using a mouse.

The software is equipped with all the essential MIDI editing tools, including the means to edit pitch-bend and other data and quantise with variable swing. Audio recordings can be quantised too, or warped manually to create interesting new rhythms, although this feature is available only for homemade recordings and third-party samples and not the built-in sample library.

Sequel isn't short of impressive features, but there are a few weaknesses. There is a lack of support for VST plug-ins, so you are stuck with the bundled instruments and the pedestrian collection of effects. The software is



▲ Given Sequel's straightforward approach to music making, it is an excellent choice for beginners

generally beginner-friendly but some areas, such as assigning an audio driver or avoiding distorting the output, need better signposting. The paper and PDF manuals are well written, but there are gaps in what they cover. Some parts of the interface need improvement; dragging notes around in the MIDI editor is awkward, and it's not possible to switch off snapping to grid to move objects freely in the Arrange Zone.

The bottom line for music-production software is whether it encourages or hinders the creative process. The lack of VST support is a setback, but there are enough instruments, effects and other features with which to find inspiration and produce high-quality mixes. Sequel's self-contained, streamlined approach makes it easy to get set up and stuck in, and we quickly found ourselves having fun with it.

Ben Pitt

SUMMARY

- ✓ Friendly, simple interface
- ✓ Well-organised samples and synths
- ✗ No support for VST plug-ins

MUSIC-PRODUCTION SOFTWARE Requires Windows XP (SP2)/Vista or Mac OS X 10.4, 1.8GHz processor, 1GB RAM, 6GB disk space, 1280x800-pixel display
SUPPLIER www.dv247.com
DETAILS www.steinberg.net

Also consider...

ADOBE Creative Suite 3 Design Premium

★★★★★

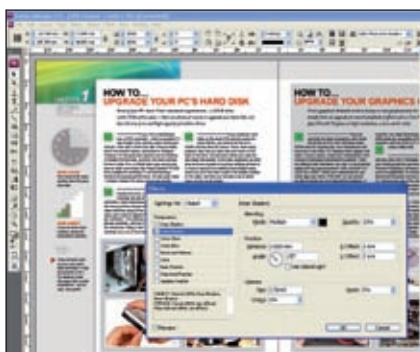
£1,577 inc VAT

BEST BUY Adobe's Creative Suite has quickly become the best bundle of creative software. With its new Design Premium, it's got even better. The bundle includes InDesign, Photoshop Extended, Illustrator, Acrobat Professional, Flash Pro and Dreamweaver – everything you need, whether you're creating work for print or the web.

The suite's value is amazing, as buying each application individually would cost you almost double. With all of the applications tightly integrated and linked by Adobe's Bridge they work well together, rather than just being a loose collection of applications.

It's not just good value, though, as every single application in the bundle is much better than its competitors, so you're getting quality, too. If you're serious about producing professional-looking results and you want the best applications to do so, this is the suite to buy.

CREATIVE SOFTWARE Requires Windows XP SP2/Vista, 512MB RAM PRODUCT CODE 19500009
SUPPLIER www.pcbw.com DETAILS www.adobe.co.uk
✓ Excellent value; tight integration between applications
FULL REVIEW Aug 2007



ACRONIS True Image 10 Home

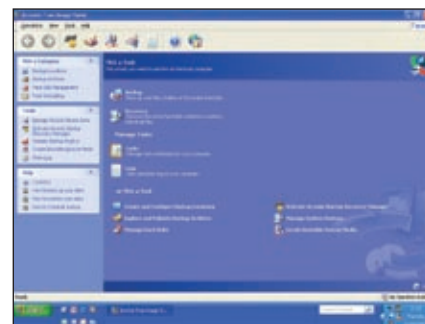
★★★★★

£24 inc VAT

BEST BUY True Image 10 from Acronis makes a complete copy of your PC's hard disk, operating system and all, so you can restore it to a working state easily.

It can make backups of folders and emails and even back up the settings of applications, providing you with everything you need to make sure your data is protected at all times.

IMAGING SOFTWARE Requires Windows 2000 and later, 133MHz processor, 128MB, 150MB disk space
PRODUCT CODE AT110 SUPPLIER www.dabs.com
DETAILS www.acronis.com ✓ Easy to use ✗ Some features not that useful FULL REVIEW Apr 2007



CYBERLINK
PowerDirector 6 Deluxe
★★★★
£50 inc VAT

Previous versions of PowerDirector haven't fared well in *Shopper* reviews, with the software failing to compete for power or ease of use against Adobe Premiere Elements and Sony Vegas Movie Studio. Version 6 is the most significant update yet, with major improvements to its export options and the capabilities of its effects.

PowerDirector 5 could already import and edit HDV footage, but it can now export back to HDV tape via FireWire, too. It also worked flawlessly with JVC's GZ-HD7, a high-definition camera that uses a new .tod file extension for its 1080i MPEG2 footage. Export options now include MPEG4 as standard rather than as an optional upgrade, with templates for DivX, high-definition AVC, iPod and PSP. Competent DVD authoring is built in and the software can upload directly to YouTube, complete with all the necessary tags.

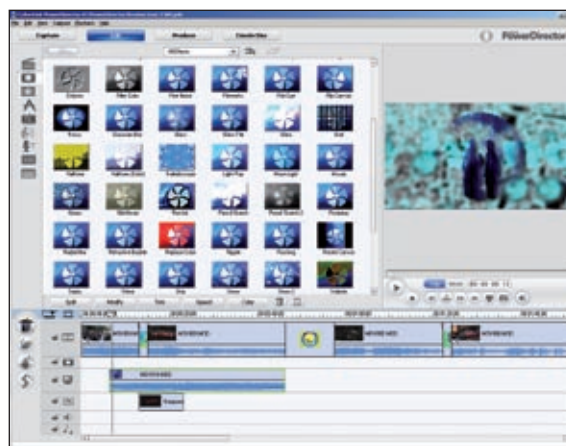
Previous versions stifled creative users with a single video effect track that ignored any transitions used by the underlying video track, resulting in clumsy-looking effects. In version 6, up to seven effects can be dropped directly on to video clips. The effects

library has a tendency towards the weird and wonderful, but the Magic Clean options include a useful set of colour-correction tools. It's a shame it's not possible to apply colour correction after the creative effects have been applied, though, as the order in which effects are applied often has a large impact on the results.

The overlay channel has had an injection of power, with simple but effective chroma keying for blue-screen style effects, a variety of preset cut-out mask shapes and the ability to define curved motion paths. This potentially complex feature has some presets to demonstrate what's possible and manages to be approachable without limiting flexibility. However, the optional fade-ins and fade-outs occur separately from any motion;

we would prefer an option for clips to move and fade simultaneously.

Sadly, a number of limitations mean productions sometimes look amateurish. Effects settings are static throughout the length of clips, while most of PowerDirector's



▲ PowerDirector is capable of some interesting effects montages

competitors allow for evolving effects by defining multiple keyframes, useful for fading effects in and out. Only two tracks are available for video, and effects and transitions can be applied only to the bottom layer. Some problems with the interface remain unresolved, including the pointless switching from previewing the entire timeline to a specific clip after every edit. The video window gave smooth previews on our Core 2 Duo test PC, letting us mix two MPEG2 streams with effects, but there's no way to resize the preview except via a pop-up Media Viewer window that renders all editing tools inaccessible.

PowerDirector still has a way to go before it can compete with the market leaders, but its improved effects capabilities and comprehensive import and export options mean it's much more useful and enjoyable than previous versions.

Ben Pitt

SUMMARY

- ✓ Comprehensive export options
- ✓ Now supports multiple effects per clip
- ✗ Static effects settings

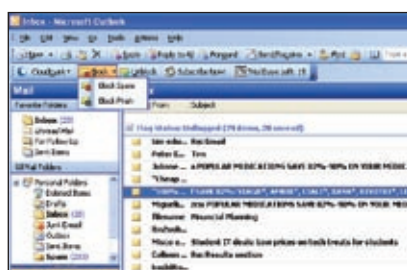
VIDEO-EDITING SOFTWARE Requires Windows 2000/XP/Vista, Pentium 4 2.2GHz, 512MB RAM (1GB recommended), 1GB disk space
SUPPLIER www.softwaredirect.co.uk
DETAILS www.cyberlink.com

Also consider...
CLOUDMARK
Desktop for Outlook
★★★★★
£24 inc VAT

BEST BUY Cloudmark Desktop is available for Outlook and Outlook Express. The software connects to a large database of spam messages maintained by other users, so it has a high probability of detecting spam. Any spam classifications you make are fed back into the database, improving Cloudmark's detection rates.

It was the clear winner of our anti-spam Labs test in *Shopper* December 2006.

ANTI-SPAM SOFTWARE Requires Windows 2000/XP, Outlook or Outlook Express **SUPPLIER** Cloudmark 020 7100 5224 **DETAILS** www.cloudmark.com ✓ Excellent anti-spam detection ✗ Outlook/Outlook Express users only **FULL REVIEW** Dec 2006


ADOBE
Photoshop Lightroom 1.0
★★★★★
£129 inc VAT

BEST BUY Adobe's Lightroom is everything a digital camera enthusiast could want. It helps manage your images, process RAW files, correct colour, retouch and export to a range of media. It's brilliant to use and, although designed for professional photographers, a great choice for anyone with an expensive camera.

PHOTO-EDITING SOFTWARE Requires Windows XP/Vista, Pentium 4 processor, 768MB RAM, 1GB disk space
PRODUCT CODE 19250102 **SUPPLIER** www.dabs.com
DETAILS www.adobe.co.uk ✓ Powerful photo manipulation ✗ Basic noise reduction and sharpening **FULL REVIEW** Jul 2007


CAKEWALK
Sonar 6 Producer Edition
★★★★★
£329 inc VAT

BEST BUY Sonar 6 is the best music-production software you can buy. Its professional-quality effects and instruments go way beyond those of the competition. Other packages will appeal to certain niche groups, but if you want the best of everything Sonar still rules the roost.

MUSIC-PRODUCTION SOFTWARE Requires Windows XP, 1.3GHz processor, 256MB RAM, 1.5GB disk space
SUPPLIER www.dolphinmusic.co.uk **DETAILS** www.cakewalk.com ✓ Comprehensive audio suite ✗ AudioSnap doesn't live up to expectations **FULL REVIEW** Mar 2007



REALLUSION iClone 2 Studio

★★★

£75 inc VAT

Reallusion's iClone aims to make creating your own 3D character animations both affordable and relatively simple.

At its most basic, there are several different character templates to choose from, ranging from urban rapper to fantasy heroine. You can also create your own characters from various body parts and default head types, but it's more interesting to create one from a photo of a friend or colleague. Just open a photo of the subject and define the boundaries of the facial features, and iClone creates a rendered model of the head for you to graft on to a pre-rendered body. You can add 3D eyes and teeth to make animations more realistic, as well as accessories such as swords, bags and jewellery.

Animating your character is also simple. The package comes with plenty of preset animations including various types of dancing, running and walking. There's also a Motion Editor plug-in that lets you create your own animations, but it's very hard to use. You can set animations to music, or record sound files for your character to lip-sync to. We found the program had trouble detecting our sound card, so we had to

use Windows Sound Recorder and import recorded Wav files.

To make a scene more realistic, you can drop in 2D background images or choose from set 3D backgrounds. You can also buy additional 3D backgrounds and 3D models from www.turbosquid.com or import your own .3ds files from 3D Studio Max. In theory, you can use iClone to make 3D films. The program has a Timeline editor and you can use keyframes to trigger events. The timeline is tricky to use, though, as the help file is basic and events sometimes fail to trigger for no apparent reason. While you can add more than one character to a scene, they appear melded in the same spot and we couldn't find any way of separating them. This gives iClone 2 an unfinished feel.

iClone 2 has a sister program called CrazyTalk, which is available in Messenger and Media Studio versions, costing £25 and £73 including VAT. It is chiefly a lip-synchronisation program, which animates 3D human or animal faces according to recorded sounds. As with iClone, you



▲ You can animate your iClone creations so they walk, run, dance or just strike a fetching pose

can use one of the template avatars or import digital photos to create your own. You can record a speech and make the head change expression as it plays using the timeline. The results can be exported to video files in various formats or embedded in greetings cards. It's simple to use and produces excellent animations. The pricier Media Studio version has more advanced synchronisation and lets you sync mouth movement to vowel or consonant sounds, but it's not worth the extra money.

iClone 2 is a great deal of fun and offers some powerful features, but it's too expensive, has a confusing timeline that often fails to work and doesn't handle multiple characters well. CrazyTalk 4 is a great laugh, though, and the Messenger version is well worth scaring your friends by putting words in their mouth.

Chris Finnamore

SUMMARY

- ✓ Great fun
- ✗ Limited usability
- ✗ Expensive

3D ANIMATION SOFTWARE Windows 2000/XP, Pentium III 600MHz, 256MB RAM, 1GB hard disk, DirectX 8.1-capable 3D graphics card, 32MB video memory
PART CODE B000ODT0RW
SUPPLIER www.amazon.co.uk
DETAILS www.reallusion.com

Also consider...

ROXIO Easy Media Creator 9 Suite

★★★★★

£33 inc VAT

PRICE CUT!

BEST BUY This suite comes with all the media-editing tools you'll ever need. Its greatest strengths are its tight integration between all the modules and its friendly, task-oriented interface. With capable editing tools, it's great value and the best media suite you can buy, although there's not enough difference to warrant upgrading.

MEDIA SUITE Requires Windows XP/Vista, 2GHz processor, 512MB RAM, 1GB disk space **PRODUCT CODE** 227000UK
SUPPLIER www.ebuyer.com **DETAILS** www.scan.co.uk
 ✓ Excellent media-editing tools ✗ Little reason to upgrade from Creator 8 **FULL REVIEW** Jan 2007



AVANQUEST RadioTracker 2

★★★★★

£20 inc VAT



BEST BUY RadioTracker 2 makes finding new music easy by downloading tracks automatically from internet radio stations. Simply select the genre of music you like and the software does the rest. A new feature enables you to pick specific tracks you want – the simple way to find a rarely heard classic.

MP3 DOWNLOAD SOFTWARE Requires Windows 2000/XP, 128MB RAM, 500MHz processor, 100MB disk space
SUPPLIER <http://shop.avanquest.com> **DETAILS** www.avanquest.com ✓ Downloads the music you want ✗ Can't delete unwanted tracks easily **FULL REVIEW** Feb 2007



STEGANOS AntiVirus 2007

★★★★★

£20 inc VAT



BEST BUY Steganos AntiVirus uses software from Kaspersky, so you get the best anti-virus protection money can buy for a lot less money. In our recent Labs test (*Shopper* April 2007), it beat every other anti-virus application hands down. For Windows Vista, you'll have to buy Kaspersky Anti-Virus 6, as Steganos doesn't currently support Vista.

ANTI-VIRUS SOFTWARE Requires Windows 98 or later, 300MHz processor, 128MB RAM, 50MB disk space
SUPPLIER www.steganos.co.uk **DETAILS** www.steganos.co.uk
 ✓ Powerful protection against viruses ✗ Not compatible with Windows Vista **FULL REVIEW** Apr 2007



MINDJET
MindManager 7 Pro
★★★★★
£233 inc VAT

MindManager 7 is a visual information management application that uses the concept of mind maps to structure your data. Mind maps lend themselves to this task because they are easy to construct and easy to read. They allow you to pull together disparate ideas and concepts and link them visually to illustrate an overview of a problem, be it a company meeting, project plan or holiday packing list.

Creating a mind map in MindManager 7 couldn't be easier. Either start from scratch, naming a central concept then adding topics and subtopics as required, or use a pre-configured template. These cover a range of standard business situations, from meeting management to project planning, and organisational charts. This gets you up and running at a proficient level in no time. New to version 7 is the ability to view and edit topics in outline view, or list topic headings, which streamlines map editing. Each topic can link with a file, folder or location, or display live information from Microsoft Office documents.

It's easy to change content or add extra components, but navigating is more fiddly. The cursor keys move

though topic boxes and can expand nodes, but using the mouse is tricky and it's too easy to drag a selection box rather than grabbing the background to drag the view around. The separate pan and zoom window alleviates this problem a little.

You can also publish the map as a static .pdf, image file or in a range of HTML layouts, from an outline to a fully functioning map, making it much easier to share your work. You can search and refine a map by using the query function. This allows you to display only those topics and their offspring that fit the search criteria and is particularly useful when using large maps with many branches and nodes.

The program uses the new ribbon interface design, which replaced the traditional drop-down menus with tabbed ribbons that house all of MindManager's tools and options. The ribbon takes up a sizable chunk of workspace, but thankfully you can set it to auto-hide.

A core element of MindManager is its ability to link up with Microsoft Office applications. Information can be exported to and imported



▲ To create a mind map, either name a central concept and add topics and subtopics, or use a preconfigured template

from Word, Excel, Powerpoint and Visio, while close interaction with Outlook mean that changes made to contacts, calendars or schedules in one application are transposed to the other. Unfortunately, there is no compatibility with other office suites such as Open Office; you need to have Microsoft's products installed and in heavy use to get the most from MindManager 7 Pro.

Tight integration with Microsoft Office, particularly Outlook, makes MindManager 7 ideal for complex collaborative work and project management. The Pro version comes at a high price, though, and clearly marks it as a corporate tool. A Lite version is available without Office integration and query and filter tools for £70 including VAT, but this is expensive. For home use, we would recommend trying a freeware application such as FreeMind first, which offers similar mapping capability and faster navigation.

David McKinnon

SUMMARY

- ✓ Comprehensive information management
- ✓ Tight integration with MS Office
- ✗ Ribbon interface takes up workspace

MIND-MAPPING SOFTWARE Requires Windows XP/Vista, 700MHz processor, 256MB RAM (512MB on Vista), 200MB hard disk
SUPPLIER www.qbs.com
DETAILS www.mindjet.com

Also consider...
MICROSOFT
Encarta Reference Library 2007
★★★★★
£28 inc VAT

BEST BUY Encarta is the best encyclopedia you can get for your PC. It's easy to search and illustrates a lot of its entries with multimedia items that really help kids learn. Its articles are quite short, but external links take you to more in-depth content. It provides a stunning balance of facts and fun.

ENCYCLOPEDIA Requires 600MHz processor, 256MB RAM, 850MB disk space **PRODUCT CODE** 83012047
SUPPLIER www.amazon.co.uk **DETAILS** www.microsoft.com
 ✓ Friendly interface and excellent multimedia ✗ Lacks depth in some articles **FULL REVIEW** Jan 2007


MR SITE
Takeaway Website
★★★★★
£30 for the first year; £2.50 per month from then on

BEST BUY Takeaway Website is everything you need to build your own website. Its price includes hosting for a year, a domain name and a website design package. There are templates for creating blogs, guest books, feedback forms and galleries, which makes this perfect for the beginner.

WEBSITE-CREATION SOFTWARE Requires Windows 2000/XP, Internet Explorer 6 **SUPPLIER** www.mrsite.com **DETAILS** www.mrsite.com ✓ Excellent value; powerful site creation tools ✗ Style options are limited **FULL REVIEW** Apr 2007

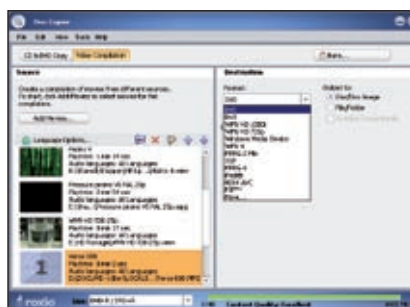

DISKEEPER
Diskeeper 2007 Home
★★★★★
£24 inc VAT

BEST BUY Over time your hard disk can get untidy, with fragments of files spreading across the entire disk. Diskeeper 2007 puts them all back together again, improving disk performance. It does all this behind the scenes, so once you've configured it you'll never have to go near it again.

It's not the most exciting application, but it's essential for a smooth-running PC.

DEFRAGMENTATION SOFTWARE Requires Windows 2000/XP. Maximum drive size 768GB **SUPPLIER** www.diskeeper.com **DETAILS** www.diskeeper.com ✓ Efficient defragmentation ✗ Not worth upgrading from previous version **FULL REVIEW** Mar 2007





▲ Conversion from a range of sources to a single format and destination is very easy

ROXIO Copy & Convert

★★★★★

£16 inc VAT

Roxio Easy Media Creator Suite 9 (reviewed in *Labs, Shopper* May 2007) is a superb bundle of applications covering all sorts of media-related tasks. For those who after just certain features, Roxio has six paired-down bundles focusing on specific areas. Copy & Convert is the latest of these, specialising in moving video and audio files from one format and location to another.

The Disc Copier module handles video conversion. Its screen is split into input and output, with DVD-Video the default for each. DVDs are automatically recompressed if you insert a dual-layer disc as the source and single-layer as the destination. Clicking Video Compilation presents options to import and export a wide range of formats. We successfully imported individual titles on a DVD, plus MPEG2, MPEG4, QuickTime, WMV, DivX, DV AVI and even M2T files used by HDV video cameras, but not MOD files from hard disk-based video cameras. Output options are impressive, with a simple drop-down list that covers DVD, WMV, DivX, 3GP (used by mobile phones) and MPEG4 templates for iPod and PSP. It makes conversion from a wide range of sources to a single format and destination extremely easy, and as such, we couldn't ask for a better video-conversion tool.

The Batch Audio Converter module does the same for audio files. Import options include Wav, MP3, Ogg Vorbis and unencrypted WMA and AAC files but not AIFF or ATRAC files. Output formats are limited to MP3, WMA and Wav, but there are comprehensive options for bit depths, sample rates and filenames based on ID tags. Tags can be edited prior to conversion. Other modules create labels and perform other housekeeping duties, and the suite is wrapped up in the same excellent launcher program used in Creator Suite.

Copy & Convert does a simple job well and is attractively priced.

Ben Pitt

SUMMARY

- ✓ Simple video and audio format conversion
- ✓ Low price
- ✗ Some gaps in format support

MEDIA FORMAT-CONVERSION SOFTWARE Requires Windows XP (SP2) or Vista, Pentium III 500MHz, 128MB RAM, 1GB disk space
SUPPLIER <http://uk.insight.com>
DETAILS www.roxio.co.uk



▲ FaceFilter Studio can turn a terrifying photo into something even more terrifying

REALLUSION FaceFilter Studio 2

★★★★

£25 inc VAT

We can't decide whether FaceFilter Studio is hilariously bad or hilariously good. It appears to be a serious program for improving the quality of portrait photos, and the packaging and website give no clue as to its comedic value.

You start by importing a photo and defining the area that contains a face that needs work. Markers are lined up against the facial features, although the software works only with head-on portraits. Next comes the Enhance Skin stage, which includes effective red-eye removal and a considerably less effective tool for removing blemishes. The Filter Skin dialog box includes options to reduce shadows and shine, smooth skin textures and adjust the skin tone. We found it useful for calming down glare from the camera's flash and overly pink faces, but when we attempted to add a bit of a tan it did not look at all convincing. Changes must be made permanent before moving on, so it's not possible to remedy mistakes without starting again from scratch.

The really bizarre bit comes when adjusting the facial expression. There are 24 templates under the Attractive heading, but perhaps our faces were just too attractive to start with, because the results varied from ridiculous to genuinely upsetting. What was meant to be Tender actually looked constipated, while Confident looked constipated and slightly drunk. At least the templates under the Fun heading, such as Angry, Kiss and Koala, lived up to our expectations. Serious use – if it's possible at all – requires the Manual Adjustment mode, where individual facial features can be moved and resized with a fair amount of precision.

FaceFilter Studio is pretty weird. We hate to imagine people with low self-esteem painstakingly attempting to fix their holiday snaps or investigating plastic surgery ideas, but for light entertainment with friends and family it's not bad, if rather short-lived.

Ben Pitt

SUMMARY

- ✓ Makes awful portrait photos slightly less awful
- ✓ Makes any portrait look hilarious
- ✗ Doesn't have lasting appeal

FACE-WARPING SOFTWARE Requires Windows 2000/XP/Vista, Pentium II 500MHz, 64MB RAM, 300MB disk space
SUPPLIER www.amazon.co.uk
DETAILS www.reallusion.com



▲ The hardware tests help you diagnose a problem, but there's little help in resolving them

VCOM Fix-It Utilities 7

★★★★

£30 inc VAT

A lot can go wrong with a PC, and diagnosing a problem can be tricky as a fault can often produce an unexpected error. VCOM's Fix-It Utilities 7 aims to take the guesswork out of the process with its range of diagnosis tools. It also ships with Trend Micro anti-virus software, but this didn't do well in our recent anti-virus test (*Shopper* April 2007) and we'd recommend installing Steganos AntiVirus 2007 instead.

The front page of the software displays two status bars to show your PC's current System Protection and System Health status: green is good and red is bad. One-click buttons run a suite of tools, including disk defragmentation and automatic updates for system health. It's simple enough, but nothing Windows doesn't already provide. There's the usual suite of tools, including a startup optimiser and Registry defragmentation tool. These didn't make any impact on system boot time or performance. We also weren't that impressed with some of the tools that replicate existing Windows tools, including RegistryMagic Registry Editor and ClockSync, which updates your system time from an internet server.

What lifts it above its competition are its diagnostic tools. Its range of tests helps you check hardware for errors. It has detailed tests for all your PC hardware, including keyboard, mouse, memory, motherboard and graphics card. It's not perfect and our graphics card, which has worked without error, failed the Polygon draw test. The reports also aren't that useful, simply listing a possible reason for an error rather than providing information on how to fix it. If you're an experienced user, though, these diagnostic tests can point you in the right direction so you can rectify a fault.

Fix-It Utilities 7 feels more like a tool for finding hardware problems than a must-have repair tool, but its suite of hardware tests makes it a valuable diagnostic suite for experienced users.

David Ludlow

SUMMARY

- ✓ Lots of hardware tests
- ✓ Helps locate a problem
- ✗ Reports don't always give answers

PC MAINTENANCE SOFTWARE Requires Windows 2000/XP/Vista, 64MB of RAM, 45MB disk space
SUPPLIER www.vanquest.co.uk
DETAILS www.v-com.com